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THE SEWANEE REVIEW

VOL. XIII.]

APRIL, 1905.

[No. 2.

LORD ACTON AND HIS OBITER DICTA ON HISTORY

In a letter to Mary Gladstone Lord Acton once wrote: "Don't mind coming to grief over parallels. A disposition to detect resemblances is one of the greatest sources of error." One is impelled, notwithstanding, to compare Lord Acton with the Sybil of Cumæ. Something of the oracular attaches itself inevitably to even the causal utterance of the most erudite man of his age; the cryptic character of his style, due to extreme condensation, increases the resemblance; and finally, the adjuration of Æneas is in point:

But oh! commit not thy prophetic mind
To flitting leaves, the sport of every wind,
Lest they disperse in air our empty fate!

Lord Acton has left behind him a reputation for learning which nearly touches the bounds of human achievement; the tradition of an historical conception of almost unparalleled grandeur: but the visible fruitage of his life is the existence of the *English Historical Review*, of which he was one of the founders; the Cambridge Modern History, of which he was the projector and organizer; a few printed lectures and scores of magazine articles, mostly unsigned—the fugitive leaves of the Sybil. In default of a systematic presentation of his vast stores of knowledge, Lord Acton stands in danger of becoming "the shadow of a mighty name."

It is therefore fortunate that under the auspices of the Royal Historical Society a bibliography of his writings has already been prepared; for it not only reveals the unsuspected number

and range of his publications, but identifies and rescues from oblivion his manifold anonymous productions. The bibliography fills twenty octavo pages, and includes upwards of four hundred and seventy titles.

John Emerich Edward Dalberg, Lord Acton, was born at Naples in 1834 and died at Tegernsee, in Bavaria, in 1902. His ancestry, like the course of his life, was cosmopolitan, and placed him in an incomparable position for surveying the wide range of modern history. His mastery of the French, German, Italian, and perhaps the Spanish, languages was as complete as his mastery of English; he lived in closest touch with the leading historians, politicians and churchmen of the states of western Europe. His political activities can here be indicated only, but were such as to admit him behind the scenes, not merely as passive observer, but as a determining force. His parliamentary career, whether as member for six years for the Irish borough of Carlow, or as spokesman, under a Liberal administration, for the Irish Office which he represented in the House of Lords by virtue of his official position as Lord-in-Waiting to the Queen, seems comparatively unimportant. Of greater moment are his constant relations with Mr. Gladstone. Acton was probably the indirect cause of Lowe's appointment as Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1868; and it is possible that, as Sir Mountstuart Grant Duff was assured "by one who had the fullest opportunity of knowing the truth," Gladstone followed Acton into the movement for Home Rule, and not the reverse. Most important of all for Acton's own development was his championship of the anti-papal cause at the Council of 1869-1870, where the dogma of Papal Infallibility was promulgated. Acton looked upon religion as the greatest interest and force in history and life; the action of the Council was diametrically opposed to his cherished conception of the Church as an institution the law of whose life was progress; and it is quite possible that his mind may henceforth have been oversensitive in dealing with ecclesiastical matters. However this may be, it is certain that few writers have had ampler opportunities for seeing political and ecclesiastical history in the making,—and Acton might well say, as practical man of affairs no less than as student of historical method,

"It is puerile to write modern history from printed books."

Lord Acton's public career in the field of scholarship may be summarized briefly. He was editor of *The Rambler* from 1859 to 1862, and of *The Home and Foreign Review* from 1862 to 1864; he was active in founding the *English Historical Review* in 1886; in the projection and internal organization of the Cambridge Modern History; and in 1895, probably at Lord Rosebery's instance, he became Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge.

Among the many productions of a biographical character which have appeared since Acton's death, the most elaborate is the Memoir by Herbert Paul, prefixed to his recently published edition of the "Letters of Lord Acton to Mary Gladstone." It contains substantive matter of importance and rarity—especially the summary of two lectures delivered by Lord Acton at Bridgnorth in 1877, which are notable as the sole approach in print to his celebrated History of Liberty.

Between 1877 and 1885 Acton is accredited with but one magazine article; it is therefore doubly fortunate that for (almost) exactly this period the innermost workings of his mind and thought should be revealed as they are in these Letters. Their substantive importance is great, for they cover a period marked by many great events in English history and are rich in intimate sketches of personal character and governmental policies. But they also contain Obiter Dicta which display his view of the nature of history, of the forces which work in history, and of historical method, more clearly here than elsewhere. His formal critiques are characterized by such indirectness of expression, such reticence and "detachment"—to use his own word—as to afford rather uncertain material for the discussion of these questions; the Inaugural Lecture deals with these specific topics, but is didactic in tone, a finished product to such an extent as to conceal as well as reveal its author's mind; the Letters, exhibiting his methods of destructive and constructive criticism in the making, contain much finer illustrative material than the copious notes appended to the Lecture. Lord Acton's formal writings are elusive; the Letters explain much that is obscure in them all.

I. *Estimate of Human Nature.*

"The science of character comes in with modern history," he declares. The features of medieval men are rarely seen save by reflected light, imperfectly; while "hundreds and even thousands of the moderns . . . may be studied in their private correspondence and sentenced on their own confession." On the whole, his opinion of human nature, as revealed in history, is low. In the Inaugural Lecture he cites with approval the dictum of Bayle: "It is more probable that the secret motives of an action externally indifferent are bad than good." There recurs in the Letters an even more explicit passage. "The experience of history teaches that the uncounted majority of those who get a place in its pages are bad. We have to deal chiefly, in life, with people who have no place in history, and escape the temptations that are on the road to it. But most assuredly, now as heretofore, the Men of the Time are, in most cases, unprincipled, and act from motives of interest, of passion, of prejudice, . . . of selfish hope or unworthy fear." Hence may logically be deduced the precepts of the Inaugural Lecture: no trusting without testing; assume no historical witness to be honest until his sincerity is proved; better excess of rigor than indulgence in your judgments.

In this matter the historian and the administrator are to be guided by the same presumptions and the same rules. Acton finds here, curiously enough, the greatest weakness of his two most intimate friends—Döllinger in the historical field, Gladstone in the political. Both err through excess of charity. Döllinger refuses to see all the evil there is in men, and "looks for the root of differences in speculative systems, in defect of knowledge, in everything but moral causes." Gladstone hardly ever judges other men too severely and so does not always make bull's eyes. Objectively, however, with respect to purity of motive and the importation of high ethical principle into politics, he seems to be, in Acton's view, the exception which proves the rule. Gladstone is a statesman who does things because they are right, "from no motive more clever than duty," who believes "that politics is an affair of principle and morality, that it touches eternal interests as much as vices and virtues do in private life."

This, as will appear, illustrates a cardinal point in Acton's historical method.

II. *Historical Method.*

When the ever-suspicious critic of modern type displaced the compiler and "the artist in coloured narrative," there occurred a change of dynasty in the historic realm. The aim of criticism is that certainty of information which is far more useful than its mere abundance. In the mental development of the scholar, "solidity of criticism counts for more than plentitude of erudition."

Lord Acton draws a sharp distinction between the treatment to be accorded to actors in history and to those who write about them. It is expressed most clearly in his article on "German Schools of History," first of all articles in the *English Historical Review*. Historians are excluded "from the benefit of the common law that innocence must be assumed until guilt is proved. The presumption that is favorable to makers of history is adverse to writers of history. For history deals considerably with hanging matter, and nobody ought to hang on damaged testimony. The life of the witness must be subjected to closer scrutiny than the life of the culprit. He is condemned when he is suspected: doubt is decisive against him."

The most characteristic feature of Acton's historical method—apart from his determination to descry the root of political and ecclesiastical differences in moral causes—is his view of historical impartiality, involving as it does the judgment of men by standards not of their age. His impartiality is not the impartiality of Ranke's school (although Ranke was one of his masters), which presents facts in a colorless manner and shows its fairness by refraining from judgment, but rather that "more robust" impartiality which dares to pronounce the sentence that justice demands. Acton writes of Thiers that late in life he said of Napoleon, "*Il faut convenir que c'était un scélérat et un fou*;" as an historian he had concealed this fact in twenty volumes—a method of which Acton disapproves. Further, Acton believes that "morality has fixed, not ambulatory standards." He has no sympathy with those who, to quote his own words from

the Machiavelli, declare "that public life is not an affair of morality, that there is no available rule of right and wrong, that men must be judged by their age, [and] that the code shifts with the longitude." "Never lower the standard of rectitude," he warns the students at Cambridge, "but try others by the final maxim that governs your own lives and suffer no man and no cause to escape the undying penalty which history has the power to inflict on wrong. . . . If we lower our standard in history," he impressively adds, "we cannot uphold it in Church or State." Few historical writers adopt this standard of judgment.

Among an historian's qualifications Lord Acton justly prizes "detachment." By it he means objectivity, that quality of self-effacement by virtue of which the historian loses his own personality and peculiar ideas in order to identify himself with other personalities and the ideas of other times. It is an indispensable prerequisite to critical analysis; as applied to the act of judging it issues in impartiality. Acton learned the art, he says, from Coleridge, but he seems to consider George Eliot its highest exponent. And in fact, she might with much reason be styled the historian's novelist. Acton says that she was one among the eighteen or twenty writers by whom he was conscious that his mind had been formed. To a certain extent the business of their lives was the same: "My life," he writes, "is spent in endless striving to make out the inner point of view, the *raison d'être*, the secret of fascination for powerful minds of systems of religion and philosophy, and of politics, the offspring of the others; and one finds that the deepest historians know how to display their origin and their defects, but do not know how to think or to feel as men do who live in the grasp of the various systems." George Eliot did. And her subsequent "detachment" was such that she could expose "scientifically and indifferently the soul of a Vestal, a Crusader, an Anabaptist, an Inquisitor, a Dervish, a Nihilist, or a Cavalier, without attraction, preference or caricature. And each of them should say that she displayed him in his strength." These passages reveal the qualities which Acton prizes in the historian, but usually fails to find: penetration, insight into motive — surface and background; the presentation of the opposing case at its strongest; complete

identification followed by complete detachment and ruthless, yet impartial, analysis and judgment.

III. *The Relations of History, Politics, Ethics, Religion and Freedom.*

It has been said of Lord Acton that he was the most catholic of Catholics and the least papistical of papists. It might also be said that he was the most liberal of Catholics and the most catholic of Liberals. The two ideas which lay most closely at his heart were religion and liberty, and they were his chosen themes for historical exposition.

His works abound in aphorisms on these subjects. "In the revolt of the last ten years against utilitarians and materialists," he wrote in 1886, "the growth of ethical knowledge has become, for the first time, the supreme object of history." "The marrow of civilized history is ethical, not metaphysical, and the deep underlying cause of action passes through the shape of right and wrong." "Political differences essentially depend on disagreement in moral principles." Religion is the master key to human action. Politics is the offspring of religion and philosophy. "The ends of liberty are the true ends of politics." "To develop and perfect and arm conscience is the great achievement of history, the chief business of every life, and the first agent therein is religion or what resembles religion." But on the other hand, "To have no moral test of duty apart from religion is to be a fanatic."

Religious bias Acton regards as the most insidious bias in both the making and the writing of history. "Subtlest of all such [error-causing] influences is not family, or college, or country, or class, or party, but religious antagonism. There is much more danger for a high-principled man of doing injustice to the adherent of false doctrine, of judging with undeserved sympathy the conspicuous adherent of true doctrine, than of hating a Frenchman or loving a member of Brook's." All understanding of history, he further declares, depends on knowledge of the forces which make it, "of which religious forces are the most active and the most definite." We cannot follow the mental variations of individuals, but "when we know the religious mo-

tive, that the man was an Anabaptist, an Arminian, a Deist, or a Jansenist, we have the master key." This must in large measure be true, but Acton himself, more than another, incurs the danger of allowing the religious idea to absorb the individual. This is particularly true of his attitude toward those whom he calls Ultramontanes. He seems to have his own peculiar definition of the word and he applies his own peculiar standard of criticism with unsparing vigor. He judges the men of the Counter-Reformation apart from the standard of their time, requires his contemporaries to do the same, and includes in one condemnation both the persecutors of the sixteenth century and the men of the present day who do not find them guilty of murder without extenuating circumstances. Newman and Manning are cases in point.

The subject of Acton's Inaugural Lecture was in part, the Unity of Modern History. He regards it as the resultant of the religious motive working in combination with the principle of freedom. In comparison with such a history as Lord Acton would have written *in extenso*, it seems not unfair to paraphrase this sketch and include it among his *Obiter Dicta*.

The first of human concerns is religion, and it is the salient feature of the modern centuries. These open with an age of extreme indifference, ignorance and decline, and are succeeded by an age whose key-note was dogmatic conviction—a force which, until the days of Cromwell, remained the supreme influence and motive of public policy. Then followed an era, wearied with struggle of faith and creed, in which the controversial spirit was increasingly displaced by the scientific—although church interests have not even yet completely disappeared from politics. The struggles of the early Reformation resulted in the formation of national churches, followed by the rise of sects in the seventeenth century; the sects were concerned with the individual rather than with the State-Church; they sought to restrict the sphere of enforced command to fixed limits; and to do that which formerly had been done by authority, outward discipline and organized violence, by means of the principle of the division of power, and the use of the intellect and conscience of free men. The dominion of will over will was thus exchanged for

the dominion of reason over reason. The zeal formerly displayed in proclaiming authoritative doctrine was used for liberty of prophesying; rationalism, toleration and political freedom were final results, and today the three most important countries in the globe are numbered among the conquests of the Protestant Reformation.

Beginning with the strongest religious movement and with the most refined despotism ever known, the modern historical cycle has led to the superiority of politics over divinity in the life of nations, and it terminates in the equal claim of every man to be unhindered by man in the fulfillment of his duty to God. This is a doctrine laden with storm and havoc, the secret essence of the rights of man, the indestructible soul of Revolution.

It is no hyperbole to say that the progress of the world toward self-government would have been arrested but for the strength afforded by the religious motive in the seventeenth century. And it is this constancy of progress, of progress in the direction of organized and assured freedom, which is the characteristic fact of modern history and its tribute to the theory of a guiding Providence. The wisdom of divine rule appears, not in the perfection, but in the improvement of the world; and liberty achieved is the one ethical result that emerges from the converging and combined conditions of modern civilization. History thus becomes, as Leibniz says, the true demonstration of religion.

But what does liberty mean?—a word which Acton elsewhere says, “resembles the camel and enjoys more definitions than any object in nature; an idea of which there are two hundred definitions,” whose “wealth of interpretation has caused more bloodshed than anything except theology.” An answer which would satisfy the rigor of philosophy is not needed here; it can be defined by its results. Where absolutism once reigned, with concentrated possessions, auxiliary churches, and inhuman laws, it reigns no more; neither authorities, nor minorities, nor majorities, can command implicit obedience. Societies have come into being, which, by long and arduous experience, have obtained a rampart of tried conviction and accumulated knowledge; these, possessing a fair level of general morality, education, courage and self-restraint, prove that the world is moving

onward and mirror the condition of life to which, through liberty, the world is tending. By outward signs you may know them: the extinction of slavery, the existence of representative government, the reign of public opinion; but better still by less apparent evidence—the security of weaker groups and the liberty of conscience which, once secured, secures the rest.

Such is Lord Acton's formal account of modern history, shaping and shaped by religion and liberty. In the Bridgnorth Lectures of 1877, memorable as the sole printed approach to History of Liberty, is to be found an interesting definition of that word. "By Liberty I mean the assurance that every man shall be protected in doing what he believes to be his duty, against the influence of authority and majorities, custom and opinion. Liberty . . . is itself the highest political end." This may be supplemented by the golden words in a letter to Mary Gladstone: "The danger is not that a particular class is unfit to govern. Every class is unfit to govern. The law of liberty tends to abolish the reign of race over race, of faith over faith, of class over class."

This Bridgnorth Lecture also assigns to America her place in the march of the nations. Acton believed that the only known forms of liberty are Republics and Constitutional Monarchies. "Europe [in 1770] seemed incapable of becoming the home of free States. It was from America that the plain ideas that men ought to mind their own business, and that the nation is responsible to Heaven for the acts of the State, ideas long locked in the breast of solitary thinkers and hidden away in Latin folios, burst forth like a conqueror upon the world they were destined to transform under the title of the Rights of Man."

IV. *The Relation of Persons and Ideas to Historical Development.*

It is fair to suppose that Lord Acton agreed, in principle, with the manifesto of the *English Historical Review* concerning the nature of history—that it is the record of human action and of thought only in its direct influence upon action; that it deals more largely with statesmen and politicians than with private

citizens, but that wherever a private citizen exercises a profound influence, history is concerned with him as the source of such influence. One part of the notes which he spent his life in accumulating, deals specifically with important moments in the development and ideas of great intellects. It is by a passage which enumerates the specific services of specific men that he fixes the time at which modern history begins. In his Inaugural Lecture he writes: "We cannot afford wantonly to lose sight of great men and memorable lives and are bound to store up objects for admiration as far as may be; for the effect of implacable research is constantly to reduce their number." Hero-worship he abhors. "Excepting Froude," he writes in one of his Letters, "I think Carlyle the most detestable of historians. The doctrine of heroes, the doctrine that will is above law, comes next in atrocity to the doctrine that the flag covers the goods, that the cause justifies its agents, which is what Froude lives for." On the other hand, while seeming to disapprove of the Hegelian view by which "the individual is swallowed up in the logic of events," it can hardly be doubted that his own philosophic tendencies led him very far in that direction. Everywhere he emphasizes the power of the idea rather than of the man. In practical politics, party with him "is not so much a group of men as a set of ideas and ideal aims": it is "sacred" to him as a body of doctrine, but not as an association of men bound together by mutual obligations and engagements, rather than common convictions. "In the life of every great man there is a point where fidelity and ideas, which are the justifying cause of party, diverges from fidelity to arrangements and understandings which are its machinery. And one expects a great man to sacrifice his friends—at least his friendships—to the higher cause." The passage illustrates his historical judgment of statesmanlike consistency as well as of the importance of the idea in history and politics. Back of the man is the party, where there is a party, and back of the party is the idea, and the idea is more than the man or the party. "It is the function of the historian to keep in view and command the movement of ideas, which are not the effect but the causes of public events," says the Inaugural Lecture. Even more explicit

are the words of a Letter already quoted in part: "There are some twenty or thirty predominant currents of thought or attitudes of mind or system-bearing principles, which jointly or severally weave the web of human history and constitute the civilized opinion of the age. The majority of them are either religious or substitutes for religion—Lutheran, Puritan, Anglican, Ultramontane, Congregational, Rationalist, Positivist, etc., etc. . . . All understanding of history depends on the knowledge of the forces which make it."

Nothing better illustrates Lord Acton's view of the importance of the idea in history, and of the place and measure of the individual as an historical force, than his critique of Seeley's "Expansion of England."

Lord Acton succeeded Sir John Seeley in 1895 as Regius Professor of Modern History in Cambridge, and his Inaugural Lecture was fittingly opened with a courteous tribute to his predecessor and an attempt to discover between them a certain community of historical belief and practice. Now Seeley specifically limits history to man acting in and through the State. "Politics," he declares, "are vulgar when they are not liberalized by history, and history fades into mere literature when it loses sight of its relation to practical politics." To this statement Acton gives a limited approval. "Everybody perceives the sense in which this is true. For the science of politics is the one science that is deposited by the stream of history, like grains of gold in the sand of a river; and the knowledge of the past, the record of truths revealed by experience, is eminently practical as an instrument of action and a power that goes to the making of the future." Elsewhere he refers to the student of history "who is the politician with his face turned backward." But Acton's conception of history was far wider than this. In his Lecture he could not well proclaim the full extent of his divergence from the ways of his predecessor; in the Letters to Miss Gladstone he was under no such restriction. "I sent for Seeley," he writes, "and read him with improvement, with much pleasure and with more indignation." The root of this last emotion was Seeley's inveterate habit of dealing with persons and personalities to the exclusion of the fundamental ideas which

pre-determined their action. He saw no Whiggism but only Whigs, and he wondered at the mistakes of the Whigs when he should have been tracing the development of their doctrine and its influence on politics, commerce and established institutions. This, in Acton's view, is all wrong. "The great object, in trying to understand history, is to get behind men and to grasp ideas. Ideas have a radiation and development, an ancestry and posterity of their own, in which men play the part of godfathers and godmothers more than that of legitimate parents." The work and place of a scientist is determined by measuring the gap in the state of the science before he came and after he went. The progress of the science is more to the world than the idiosyncrasy of the scientist. So also in history. "The vividness and force with which we trace the motion of history depends on the degree to which we look beyond persons and fix our gaze on things." The implication, therefore, is that the historian should avoid Seeley's method and "go straight at the impersonal forces which rule the world, such as predestination, equality, divine right, secularism, congregationalism, nationality, and whatever other ruling ideas have grouped and propelled associations of men." This is Lord Acton's historic ideal.

In one sense Lord Acton has left no *Obiter Dicta* except in his letters, on the margins of his books, and in reported conversations. His "black boxes" contain, we are told, the systematized results of his readings: the substance and purport of each work he studied; the important moments in the development and ideas of great intellects; the material needed for the detailed scrutiny of great historical problems—notes voluminous, applicable and constantly applied to all the historical topics he treated. But in another and a very true sense, all of his utterances are *Obiter Dicta*. He wrote an enormous amount, but made no systematic presentation *in extenso* of his interpretation of history. His writings are scattered in fragmentary fashion over long periods of time; "carried on a little apart from the main chain of durable literature," to use his own expression with regard to magazine articles; not synchronized or harmonized, lacking the force of unity, evoked by the call of the time. When his Cambridge Lectures are published, something will have

been done to reveal his maturest opinions upon modern history from the Reformation through the French Revolution.

It is too early to pronounce upon his rank and place among writers of history and public men. Measuring him by his own standard, one can only conjecture whether his influence in shaping historical thought and adding to historical knowledge will not be considered inferior to his influence in determining public policies and in moulding contemporary political and religious opinion. In both fields his action has been largely indirect. In politics and church affairs he was a champion of losing causes. In the sphere of history much depends upon the permanence of his influence in Cambridge and the ultimate effect upon historical studies produced by the Cambridge Modern History. His *magnum opus*, the History of Liberty, remained an aspiration.

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